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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 001229

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2012

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SUBJECT: GOI'S REACTION TO THE NEW ZINNI MISSION AND
BERLUSCONI'S MARCH 12 TRIP TO SAUDI ARABIA

REF: SECSTATE 44938

CLASSIFIED BY: POL MC TOM COUNTRYMAN FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

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1. (C) ON MARCH 8, POL MC AND NEA WATCHER DELIVERED REFTEL POINTS AND THE PRESIDENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO LUCA FERRARI, THE MFA'S OFFICE DIRECTOR FOR ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS. POL MC STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING THE EU AND THE US SPEAK THE SAME MESSAGE ON THE MEPP: IT'S IMPERATIVE FOR ARAFAT TO END THE VIOLENCE AND FOR ISRAEL TO ACT IN A MANNER THAT HELPS RESTORE CALM. POL MC ALSO UNDERLINED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EU PUBLICLY SUPPORTING BOTH PARTIES ENDING THE VIOLENCE AND GOING BACK TO NEGOCIATIONS.

2. (C) FERRARI DESCRIBED GENERAL ZINNI'S RETURN TO THE REGION AS A "VERY WISE MOVE" ON THE PART OF THE PRESIDENT, ESPECIALLY BEFORE THE BEIRUT ARAB SUMMIT. THE GOI WOULD BE FULLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE THE KIND OF MESSAGE DESCRIBED IN REFTEL. HE EXPECTED SOLANA TO MAKE A PUBLIC STATEMENT FOR BOTH ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS TO END THE VIOLENCE.

3. (C) ON PM AND ACTING FM BERLUSCONI'S MARCH 12 TRIP TO SAUDI ARABIA, FERRARI SAID THAT BERLUSCONI WAS GOING TO EXPRESS HIS SUPPORT FOR THE CROWN PRINCE'S PEACE VISION. HOWEVER, THE PM IS PLANNING TO ASK THE SAUDIS FOR CONCRETE DETAILS ABOUT THEIR PLAN, ESPECIALLY ON SENSITIVE ISSUES SUCH AS JERUSALEM, THE REFUGEES, THE BORDER, AND SECURITY GUARANTEES TO THE ISRAELIS.

4. (C) COMMENT: ITALY REACTED VERY POSITIVELY TO THE RETURN OF GENERAL ZINNI TO THE MIDDLE EAST, AND WE EXPECT OTHER EUROPEANS TO HAVE A SIMILAR REACTION. EVEN THOUGH THE ITALIANS SUPPORT THE SAUDI PEACE VISION, MFA OFFICIALS DO NOT EXPECT BERLUSCONI TO GET ANY PRECISE AND DETAILED ANSWERS ON HIS TRIP NEXT WEEK TO SAUDI ARABIA. END COMMENT.

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